

East-West dialogue continues, despite dispute over Libya

By Joseph C. Harsch

The new post-Geneva East-West dialogue was continued in two different art forms over this past week.

In Geneva, United States and Soviet delegations resumed their talks about arms control, while in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea their armed forces danced a delicate military minuet.

There is a possibility that something may come of the first art form before this new round of talks in Geneva is finished. There is evidence from the second that both the US and the Soviet Union are being ultracautious these days to avoid the sound of distant shooting which could smother the sound of talking.

President Reagan obviously would have enjoyed doing something unpleasant to Col. Muammar Qaddafi of Libya. The President was under pressure from his ideological right wing to start shooting at Colonel Qaddafi with bombs or bullets. He sent a carrier battle group steaming toward, but not into, the Gulf of Sidra — which the colonel calls his own, but which the US insists is international water.

The Soviet response was delicate. They might have sent fighting ships, destroyers, or larger on converging courses with US ships. They have played such games, called "military chicken," often enough in the past.

Instead, according to US Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, "they moved eavesdropping ships along the Libyan coast" and were "monitoring American ship movements and sharing the findings with Libya."

The US countered by sending a reconnaissance, not a fighter, aircraft near the Gulf of Sidra. In turn, the Libyans sent up two fighters to watch the US plane, but made no hostile gesture. There was no shooting as in previous incidents.

In the language of power politics it was as though Mr. Reagan had said to Moscow, "I don't like that fellow Qaddafi and

I am thinking of doing something to him," and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had replied, "He is a friend of ours and we care, so be careful."

Mr. Reagan was extremely careful, on the advice of his military leaders. Secretary of State George Shultz talked as though he favored a military attack on Libya, but the voice from the Pentagon was for caution. Mr. Weinberger, ever the hawk when it is a matter of weapons procurement, once again was the dove in a matter of weapons use.

And with reason. The Soviet Union has recently delivered many SA-5 surface-to-air missiles to Libya. The precise number is not available, but the quality of the weapons is. It has a range of approximately 200 miles. It probably was the weapon that brought down two US naval fighter planes during the Lebanon war. The Soviets have over 2,000 in their arsenals. Enough have presumably been sent

to Libya to give Colonel Qaddafi respectable defense against an air attack.

A battery of SA missiles needs advance warning of an approaching target. The Soviet "eavesdropping ships" which monitored the USS Coral Sea this week had the capability of warning the SA batteries, probably manned by Soviet technicians, of any approaching US aircraft.

Add that there are Soviet Backfire bombers based in southwest Russia, near Yalta, which can easily cover the entire Mediterranean. The middle of the Mediterranean is estimated by Western military experts as being about where Soviet potential airpower balances Western potential airpower.

The Gulf of Sidra is less than 200 miles deep. An SA-5 missile has a range of about 200 miles. In other words, any US aircraft or ship entering the Gulf of Sidra would be vulnerable to attack by Libya's Soviet-built SA-5 missiles. And they would also be well within range of Soviet,

land-based air support, should Moscow choose to provide such support.

The fact that Soviet electronic-intelligence ships shadowed US naval forces approaching the Gulf of Sidra proves nothing about what the Soviets might do in case of an actual test. But it was a reminder to Washington that if they attacked Colonel Qaddafi with bombs or bullets, the Soviets would be doing so within range of Soviet weapons which could be used to protect Moscow's client.

In other words, the reopening of the arms control talks in Geneva did not take place this week against a backdrop of Americans shooting at a Soviet client in North Africa, as might well have happened. Instead, the backdrop was one of extreme military caution. Neither the Coral Sea nor its reconnaissance plane entered the Gulf of Sidra. And the Soviets did not deliver their warning by brandishing actual fighting ships, but by visibly shadowing the US ships from the decks of electronic-intelligence ships.

Hence the diplomats could continue waltzing around control possibilities unrattled by shooting in the background.

Those talks in Geneva have reached the point where Washington is waiting to see whether Moscow might come up with something more detailed than before along the lines of a conceivable trade-off of Soviet offensive missiles for some form of restraint on President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (popularly known as "star wars"). On Wednesday, the eve of the Geneva talks, Gorbachev extended the Soviet moratorium on nuclear testing for another three months and said that the Soviet Union would put forward a comprehensive plan to rid the earth of nuclear weapons within 15 years.

Experts believe that trade-off on "star wars" is possible, at least in theory. That possibility has been scouted and knowledgeable observers believe that both sides have been busy studying possible details. But these matters take time.